

Connectedness Theory: A Model of Individual and Group Development

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Abstract

Connectedness Theory is a model of individual and group functioning emphasizing interactive relationships. These interactive relationships are referred to as connections which exist within and between individuals, and between individuals and non-human environmental influences. When positive involvement occurs between the individual and a connection, "connectedness" or a feeling of support and strength is experienced. Connectedness is described as a vital element in the fulfillment of basic needs. The fulfillment of the basic needs of intimacy, freedom, and meaning is described as the result of obedience to natural laws.

Connectedness Theory:

A Model of Individual and Group Development

My graduate school training in community-clinical psychology emphasized a social-ecological perspective in understanding individual functioning. In this perspective, an interactive process occurs in which each individual is influenced by the environment, at the same time contributes to the environment, which is followed by the modified environment influencing the individual. Insights from that training is here combined with my religious training and personal experiences in offering a theoretical model of individual and group development.

In this theory, a person's functioning is analyzed through examining interactive relationships in the person's life. These interactive relationships are hereafter referred to as connections. These connections are seen as existing both within the individual, such as connections between the mind and the body, and between the individual and multiple sources of external influences. These external connections are with sources such as other people, non-human environmental influences such as animals, plants, physical elements, divine forces, evil forces, and the time dimensions of past, present, and future. These connections are often very subtle and may thus be difficult to perceive and possibly impossible to totally comprehend in our current state of knowledge.

Numerous sources of influences or connections always exist for each individual, but these are only helpful in a person's life if they are used. The unused connections are analogous to electrical outlets which never have anything

plugged into them--the potential power remains viable but dormant. These connections become functional as a means of support to the person, when the person becomes positively involved with the source of influence. Such a positive involvement with a source of support is referred to here as "connectedness".

The major components of Connectedness Theory will be briefly described, followed by a discussion of how this view could be used in designing and implementing organized efforts in enhancing the well being of the participants.

Connectedness Theory

I. Life is difficult for all people.

The first major point of this theory is that regardless of age, gender, social status, location, etc., life is full of difficulties. These difficulties can be seeds for growth, or germs for deterioration depending on the support available and outlook of the individual.

II. All people have the same basic needs.

These basic needs are summarized in three broad categories:

Intimacy

Intimacy is defined as a need for oneness. This includes love, support, a sense of belonging.

The lack of fulfillment of this need is associated with relative levels of loneliness and isolation.

Freedom

Freedom is defined as a need to make choices, have impact, and direct one's own life.

In contrast, a lack of fulfillment in this area gives a feeling of enslavement and helplessness.

Meaning

Meaning is defined as a need to sense a purpose in one's activities. Existential questions such as "Why am I here?", "What comes after this life?" are examples of attempts to satisfy the need for meaning.

A feeling of having little or no purpose is associated with this need not being fulfilled.

III. Individuals vary according to vulnerabilities and assets given to them.

The third major point of the theory is that certain things happen to us and are out of our control. These factors that an individual has little or no control over, include strengths and weakness from genetic endowments, family interactions, cultural factors, time period of the world, etc. The combination of such factors result in no two people having the same set of strengths and weaknesses. The fulfilling of our basic needs is directly influenced by these factors over which we may have no control.

IV. There are healthy and unhealthy things which we do.

In addition to positive and negative factors in our lives which happen to us, there are many aspects of life over which we do have control through personal choices. These choices also directly affect how well our basic needs are fulfilled.

It is the view of this theory that everything we experience (both have happen to us and choose to do) contributes to our functioning. These contributions are made according to natural laws with natural consequences which apply to all matter including all people. This is to say that all sources of stimulation, physical (e.g., light, auditory), social (e.g., family, peers, television), environmental (e.g., animals, plants, air, ground) impact on us, often in very subtle ways.

Because these influences are often so subtle, and because natural consequences of behavior are often not clearly tied to the behavior itself, people choose many routes in pursuing the fulfillment of their basic needs. A major quest in life is to identify and live according to "sure-paths" to basic needs fulfillment. The natural result of following sure-paths is to experience peace and joy. Peace is defined here as a sense of harmony, and joy as a deep and lasting sense of satisfaction following the accomplishment of a difficult positive goal.

Along with following sure-paths, a person needs to avoid "short-cuts" to basic need fulfillment. These short-cuts ultimately result in misery which is defined as a deep and lasting sense of anguish and frustration. A tremendous difficulty in this quest, is the fact that sure-paths require effort, faith, and the rewards are usually not immediate. On the other hand, short-cuts often provide immediate benefits and temporarily seem to fulfill basic needs.

There is a perception, however, that the needs have been met in only a hollow fashion.

Along with the natural consequences associated with sure-paths and short-cuts, it is of great importance to realize that there are powers which influence us to take one route or the other. Divine influences prompt and sometimes push us to choose sure-paths, while evil influences do the same in prompting the use of short-cuts. Even with the great power of these opposing forces, the individual retains the power to choose to follow the urges of one or the other at any given time.

V. We are attracted to things of permanence.

A fifth major premise of this theory is that the essence or core of each of us is eternal and stable. Because of this, things that remind us of eternity, permanence, or stability are attractive to us. Even unhealthy and painful things that become part of our lives tend to be held onto if they provide some stability. It is as if the longer we experience something, the more we view it as part of us, or inseparable from our essence or core self. We may feel that we cannot give up certain patterns of behavior that may have been beneficial at one point, because giving them up is seen as giving up part of the self. In actuality the core self remains the same, and the behavior patterns often need to be flexible to change according to changes in life.

As sure-paths are followed and short-cuts avoided, a person experiences an increasing sense of selflessness, or a unity with other people, with nature, and with God. The longer this course is pursued the more permanent it becomes. The "we" becomes the unit of focus. As short-cuts are followed and sure-paths avoided, a person experiences an increasing selfishness, or constriction of interests outside the self. This also becomes a progressively permanent state, a

permanence of focus on the "me". Figure 1 is an attempt to portray how the various points of the theory presented so far fit together on the level of an individual person.

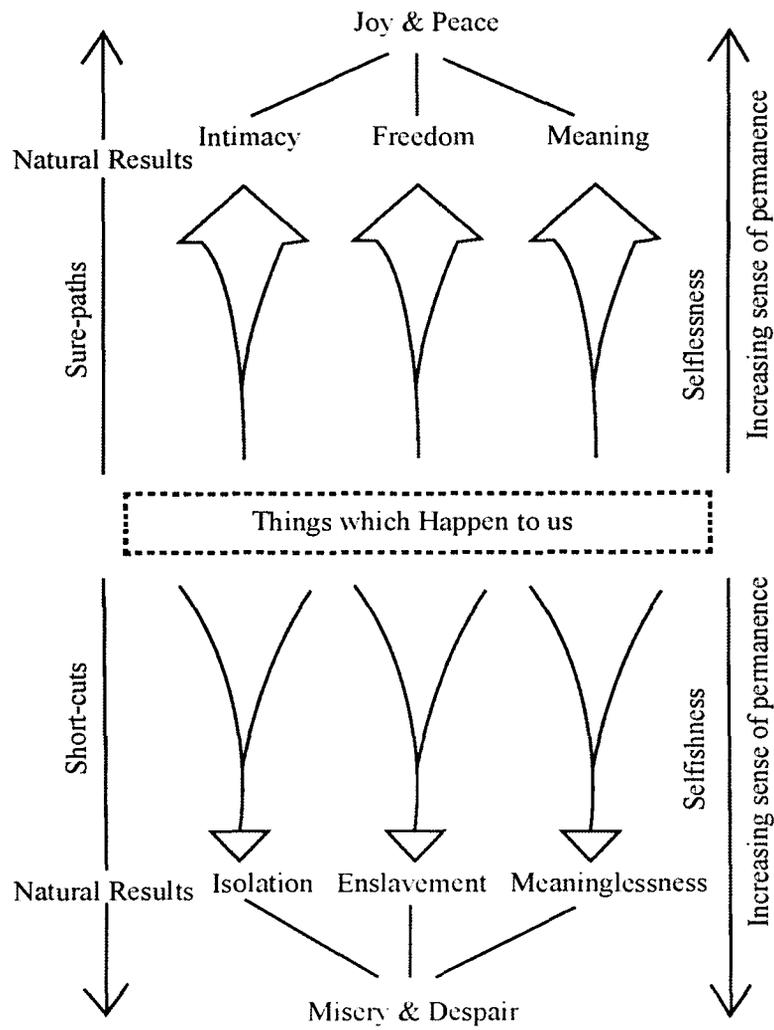


Figure 1

VI. Connected to Life.

A critical premise of Connectedness Theory is that basic needs can only be fulfilled through experiencing connectedness with various aspects of life.

Connectedness was defined earlier as positive involvement with a source of support. In the human realm, this means that we need other people to fulfill our needs. Whenever the connectedness is combined with a sense of permanence, the effect is often a powerful motivation in that aspect of functioning.

It is important to emphasize that time, as we know it, serves to distort our total comprehension of connectedness. We often find it difficult to perceive how past experiences and behavior impact on our present functioning. Even more difficult to comprehend is how our perception of the future affects us now.

Through analyzing an individual's connections to life on various levels of interaction, and over the time dimensions of past, present and future, it is often possible to explain why certain things feel good to us. For example, a letter to a loved one deepens a sense of connectedness to the other person. This connectedness is intensified if a sense of permanence in the relationship is felt. This sense of permanence is from the perception of the quality of the past, present and future relationship with that person. On a non-human level of connectedness, a person or group may derive much satisfaction and strength from helping to reduce pollution and conserve resources through recycling paper products. A sense of cooperation with primitive and ancient nature may be felt, along with a pride in ensuring that nature will continue into the future. Figure 2 diagrams various levels of connections, with quality of involvement or connectedness, across the dimensions of time.

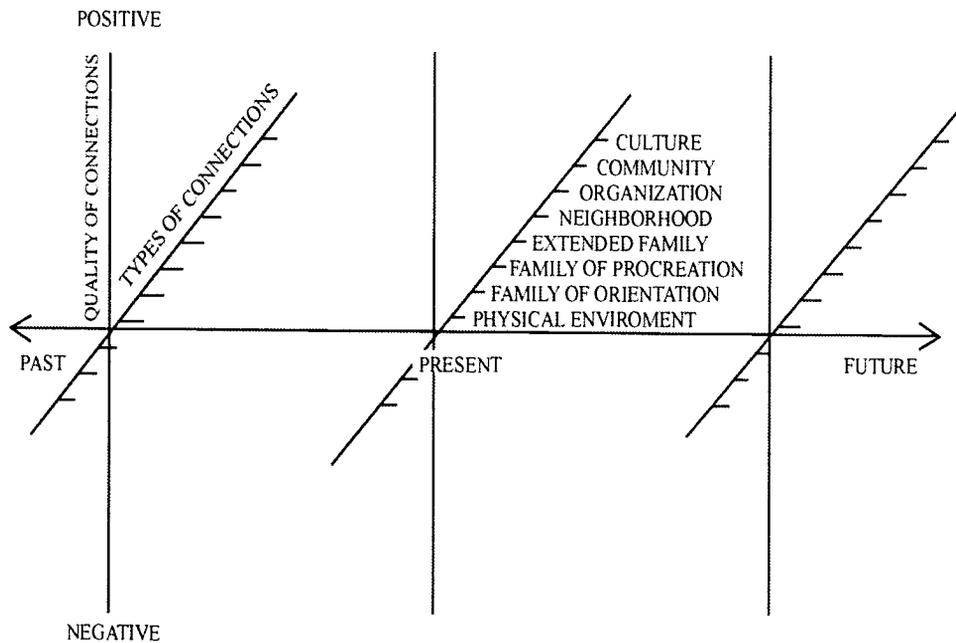


Figure 2

Many practical examples could be given of connectedness in each of the levels of connections across the time dimensions. It is important to emphasize the role of intentions in understanding the support we derive from connectedness. If a person interacts positively with a source of support, both parties are benefitted and strengthened. On the other hand, if a person performs in an interaction with ulterior motives, then the other party can still be benefitted, but the potential strength from the interaction is not received fully by the person.

Through vulnerabilities we all have, and through unhealthy choices we all make, all of us experience difficulties. These difficulties become intensified as connectedness is reduced. This reduction in connectedness may occur by 1) disregarding or not utilizing connections, 2) actively rejecting connections, and 3) the withdrawal of connections by others. The first two ways of reducing support can be seen largely as our own responsibility, whereas the social environment is more responsible as to whether or not support is withdrawn or withheld.

VI. Joint responsibility of all people.

We are all connected. Genetics connects us with past, and will connect us to the future. Our behaviors impact on others, and their behaviors impact on us. As vulnerabilities are supported by the strengths of others, relationships become even more connected. It is of vital importance to begin to understand how all people contribute to our collective functioning, and that differences among us be appreciated.

The core or essence of connectedness theory can be summarized in two interrelated statements. Our quest in life is to follow sure-paths in making the best out of whatever circumstances we have. And secondly, we are to help others do the same.

Conceptions, change techniques, and aims appropriate to the four ecologies of the psychological environment.*

	Psychological Ecologies	Concepts and Change Techniques Appropriate	Aims
Freedom	Self-Maintenance Ecology	Behavior modification and cognitive social learning theory may be applicable to understand and help the person	Acquisition of new and change of old behavior
	Normative Ecology	Psychodynamic theory may be useful to understand and help the person	Understanding of self and acceptance of responsibility
Meaning	Transcendental Ecology	Humanistic-existential psychology, religion, philosophy, meditation, and prayer may be useful.	Awareness and self-actualization
Intimacy	Social Ecology	Community psychology and social change may be necessary and useful	Change in role relationships

*Adapted from Sarbin, 1970